

Radio Scouting

Revitalization and on-going growth through visionary leadership, active communication, and engaged volunteers.

Jim Wilson

PATHFOREWORDSM

Radio Scouting

Here's the story of the revitalization and on-going growth of this exciting area of amateur radio and Scouting.

Radio Scouting, the combination of amateur radio and Scouting, has a rich history. Beginning in 1918 with the introduction of the Wireless Merit Badge, which became the Radio Merit Badge in 1923, Radio Scouting has continued to grow and thereby extend the reach of the fun, technology, and magic of amateur radio within the Scouting movement.

The pinnacle of Radio Scouting activity is the annual Jamboree on the Air (JOTA), which began in the mid-1950s. It is now the world's largest Scouting event with over 700,000 Scouts on the air from 6,000 stations across 150 countries. It happens on the third weekend of October and is often a Scout's introduction to amateur radio as well as providing the opportunity to communicate with other Scouts across the country and around the world.

This case study addresses my work in Radio Scouting, providing visionary leadership and persistent communication and support to grow this important segment of Scouting.

Jamboree on the Air—
largest Scouting event
in the World—
7,000,000 Scouts
On the Air!

National JOTA Organizer

In late 2010 I was asked to take on the leadership of the USA Jamboree on the Air activities as the National JOTA Organizer. This came about due to the fact that I was one of the few licensed amateur radio operators employed by the Boy Scouts of America's National Council.

Two years prior to my accepting the position, the previous organizer had retired from the BSA and the existing support materials had been reused for several years. Reporting for the USA relied on the World Scout Bureau's system and, without active promotion activity was at a very low level.

As I considered accepting the position, I examined closely the World Bureau's support materials and found that they recommended forming a volunteer National Radio Scouting Committee. So upon acceptance my first action was to recruit a volunteer committee composed of those active in Radio Scouting at the local Scout council level and who were willing to serve in this capacity. This resulted in an inaugural committee of 22 Scouting volunteers.

The first action was to engage everyone in a review of the existing promotion and support materials followed by a conference call in early 2011. On the call, many recommendations were made for improvements to the support and promotional materials. The meeting minutes carried an extensive listing of key action items. Over the next two months a great deal of work went into creating the JOTA website at <http://www.scouting.org/jota/>

ARRL and Scouting

The American Radio Relay League (ARRL) is the national amateur radio organization. As a result of work by the ARRL's ad hoc committee on Scouting through 2010, in early 2011 the Boy Scouts of America and the ARRL signed a memorandum of understanding denoting their work together since the 1918 Wireless Merit Badge and the continued work in the future to support amateur radio and Scouting. Their support via local clubs and nationally through their publications and direct support to the National Scout Jamboree have been exemplary.

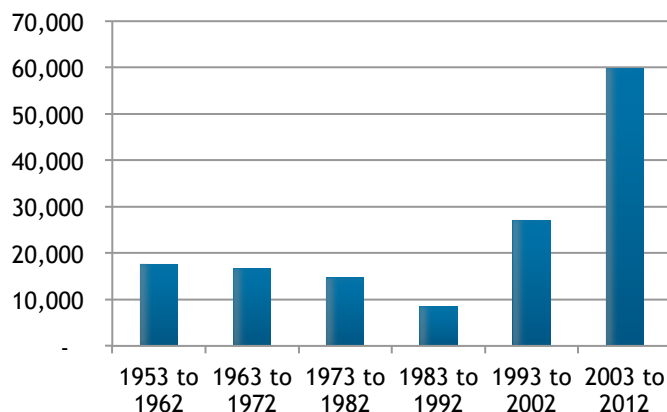
K2BSA Amateur Radio Association

The K2BSA amateur radio call sign was first put into action in 1971 as a result of a great deal of work with the FCC, who issued the call sign. Since that time, K2BSA is the call sign that is typically associated with the National Council of the Boy Scouts of America. It has also been in operation at every National Scout Jamboree since 1977. All this history, as well as current activities, can be found at <http://www.k2bsa.net>

In mid-2011, I was elected President of the K2BSA Amateur Radio Association. In that role, I began at once to bring the organization's activities and communication back up to speed. I built its website that has since become a vital communication link for all Radio Scouting topics. I also worked to reinstate its 501c3 status with the IRS, which occurred retroactively in late 2011. I further established important social media communication channels including Facebook and Twitter accounts.

With the assistance of its volunteer membership a bank account was established which served throughout 2013 to support the ongoing Jamboree efforts. This organization has proven to be a vital cog in supporting overall Radio Scouting activities, serving much as a foundation to help drive important initiatives outside of and in addition to formal Scouting efforts.

Radio Merit Badges Earned



Radio Merit Badge

As noted earlier, the Radio Merit Badge has been around since the very early days of Scouting. I asked the BSA Registration Service how its been doing in terms of number earned since those early days. What I expected was a gradual decline, but what I found instead was substantial growth since the mid-1990s. The chart above shows the number earned per decade with nearly 60,000 earned in the past ten years.

The biggest change has been dropping the Morse Code requirement in the early 1990s. I'm told there are two types of merit badges for Scouts: Eagle-required and easy. Radio Merit Badge falls into that last category! But it is a great opportunity to introduce Scouts to the technology of ham radio.

JOTA 2011 Results

The communication program leading into the October 2011 event rolled out a steady message of the fun, technology, and magic of getting on the air. Audiences included Boy Scout Councils, volunteers, and amateur radio operators. The new registration system recorded 202 stations from 109 councils and 37 states prior to the event. After JOTA, 68 stations filed reports, up 119% from 2010. They reported that 3,185 Scouts were engaged across those stations --- an increase of 602% over the 2010 results.

This represented substantial success. None-the-less, the National Radio Scouting Committee developed a list of 14 improvement projects for 2012, chiefly around promoting the event early and often, bolstering the supporting information, and offering a reward for filing the report.

In early 2012, the committee met to discuss the action items and to have people sign up to get one or more accomplished. Those who signed up were retained on the committee. Those who did not were thanked for their efforts in 2011. The 2012 committee consisted of eight active and engaged members.

K2BSA Jamboree Operation

In September 2011, I was selected to be the chairman for the K2BSA amateur radio operation at the 2013 National Scout Jamboree. This then brought together all the amateur radio activities within Scouting under common leadership.

At that time I began reviewing past Jamboree operations including those hosted at both the National Jamboree and at the World Jamboree. I was also the recipient of a well thought out point paper by Bill Ragsdale, K6KN, commenting that the systems deployed at the Jamboree needed to be simple and straightforward in order to catch the interest of the Scouts --- so that they could honestly say: "I can do this at home!"

In addition to this simple straightforward approach, I needed to take into account the new location, The Summit Bechtel Scout Reserve in West Virginia, as well as the new approach to corporate sponsorship within the Boy Scouts of America.

I shared the first draft of the operations plan with the Radio Scouting Committee and then began to discuss the possibilities with sponsors and volunteers for the Jamboree operation itself. This early plan really helped to sell the vision and get people on board.

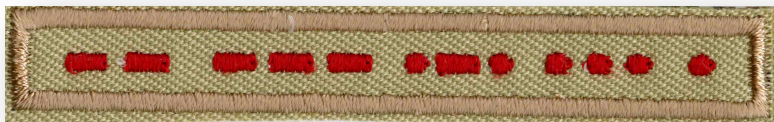
For sponsorship, I reached out to amateur radio manufacturers who had supported past Jamboree operations with loan equipment. This time I asked them to donate the equipment with the thought to provide it to local councils after the Jamboree. This would not only give the sponsor exposure during the Jamboree but enduring exposure via local Scout councils. One sponsor stepped forward, Ray Novak, N9JA, at Icom America. But he wanted to go one better --- no need to wait until Jamboree, let's get started right now!

Station Loan Program

Based on that early discussion and our follow-on sponsorship agreement with Icom America, ten loan stations were built and ready to go to local Scout councils, see below. This program began in May 2012. It helped facilitate more stations getting on the air all during the year but particularly during Jamboree on the Air.

Icom also agreed to provide promotion for Jamboree on the Air and Radio Scouting via their website, their print and online advertising, and in their booth at amateur radio events. This has been extremely helpful in getting the word out and raising awareness.





stations reported their results with 18,537 Scouts getting on the air, an increase of 482% over 2011. Great results, but what improvements are needed in 2013?

Morse Code Interpreter Strip

In late 2011 the National Radio Scouting Committee began working with the BSA Awards and Insignia Committee to determine if a recognition patch for uniform wear could be designated for amateur radio operators. The first attempts were fairly broad approaches, but the Awards and Insignia Committee “telegraphed” their thoughts by noting that we had not requested a Morse Code interpreter strip. Within hours, we had indeed requested such a strip!

This strip recognizes the wearer’s ability to send and receive Morse Code at 5 words per minute. It is worn in the same place on the uniform that the Spanish, French, and other interpreter strips are worn. The dots and dashes spell out the word M-O-R-S-E.

This introduction generated a great deal of excitement and publicity in the amateur radio community and has captured the imagination of many Scouts who are interested in codes. It is currently the number two selling interpreter strip, after Spanish.

JOTA 2012 Results

The Radio Scouting Committee continued to populate the JOTA website with further supporting materials including Radio Merit Badge training materials and an activity book to be used at JOTA events to engage the Scouts. Extensive promotion occurred for Scouting audiences and for amateur radio audiences. You can see the Icom America poster nearby that was set up in nearly all their dealer retail locations.

Station registration prior to the event hit 375, up a great deal from the 202 the previous year. After the event, 204

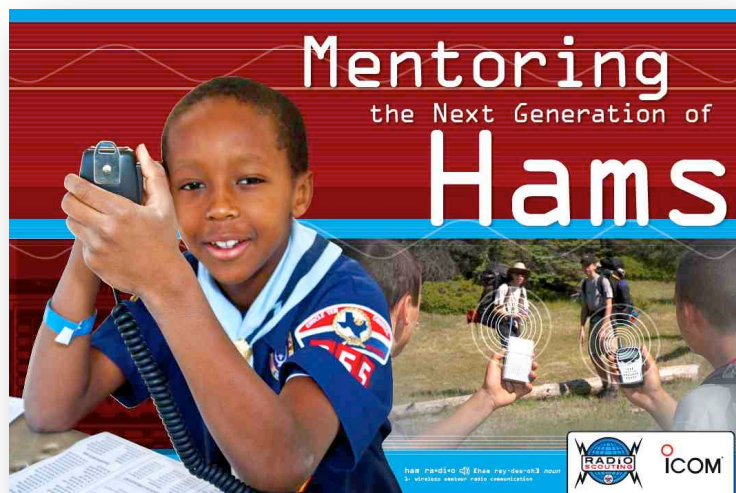
The National Radio Scouting Committee was expanded in early 2013 to include the leadership team from the upcoming K2BSA Jamboree operation. This brought in new thinking and fresh perspective. Only a few new action items were included in the plan, with most of the 2013 energy going into the Jamboree.



Amateur Radio Operator Rating

In April 2013, as a result of further efforts with the BSA Awards and Insignia Committee, the Amateur Radio Operator Rating Strip was announced. Worn on the right uniform sleeve, the only qualification is to hold an amateur radio license issued by the FCC.

As you might imagine, this generated a considerable bit of interest in both the Scouting and amateur radio communities. The first 1,000 patches were sold out within weeks. As of October 2013, 6,425 sold.



With the addition of the Amateur Radio Operator Rating Strip, Radio Scouting now has a three-tier approach to moving Scouts deeper into the fun, technology, and magic of amateur radio. This includes the introduction of amateur radio via what is generally a casual exposure to Jamboree on the Air while attending a camporee, where it is one more activity of many others during that weekend.

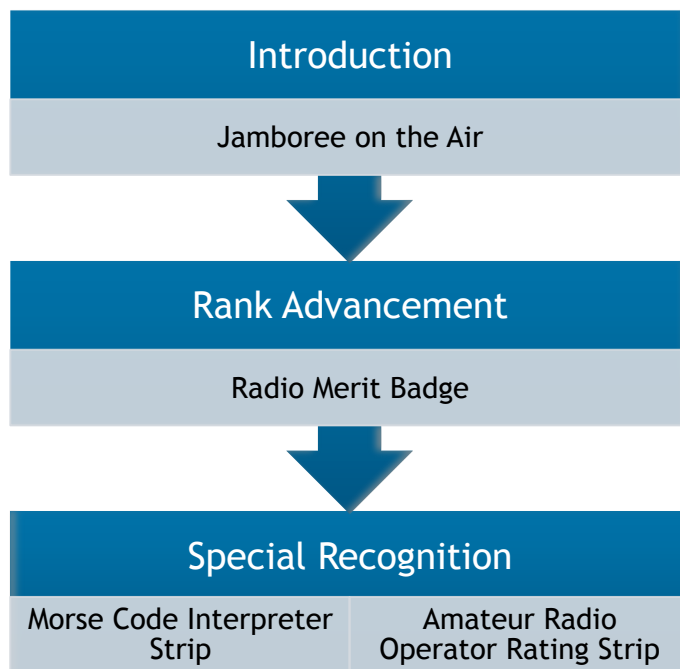
However, if that captures the Scout's attention, he can readily move on to the Radio Merit Badge within his normal rank advancement process. After the Radio Merit Badge, with roughly a similar additional effort, he can study for the Technician Class Amateur License Examination. Upon passing, he's eligible to wear the Amateur Radio Operator Rating Strip on his uniform.

He can further study Morse Code and, at the unit level, satisfy the requirements (5 words-per-minute sending and receiving) to wear the Morse Code Interpreter Strip. These patches for uniform wear are great incentives to take the next steps along the Radio Scouting continuum.

2013 National Jamboree

In early 2013 Jamboree staff member recruiting picked up considerable pace. Scouting volunteers who were licensed amateur radio operators offered to spend between two and three weeks sleeping in a tent and working 10 to 12 hour days to support the K2BSA operation. Even with this, over 50 volunteers signed up.

In addition, several sponsors signed up to provide equipment. Leading that effort was Icom America who not only provided all the transceivers and supporting gear, but also installed three amateur radio repeaters on-site at The Summit on a permanent basis.



Other supporters included SteppIR for antennas, ARRL with supporting publications and materials, Array Solutions with band-pass filters, and GigaParts with Heil Sound headsets.

In May, all sponsors sent their equipment to the Miami Valley Scout Council in Dayton, Ohio. Twenty Scouting volunteers then arrived for the Dayton Drill, a week of intense activity setting up all the equipment and testing both the station and the Radio Merit Badge curriculum. The week ended with attendance at the Dayton Hamvention, to pick up needed items for the station.

The Miami Valley Council then made arrangements to transport all the gear to the Jamboree. Fantastic support from Doug Nelson, Scout Executive.

Once at the Jamboree site at the Summit Bechtel Scout Reserve in West Virginia, set up went very well based on this previous work and the extensive planning that took place. Forty-two volunteers arrived for the three-week effort.

The overall Jamboree operational results were right on target from our original goals. Just over 2,600 Scouts got in front of a microphone and on the air --- exceeding our original goal of getting 10% of Jamboree participants on the air, achieving 11%.

Nearly 340 Scouts earned the Radio Merit Badge. The set up of 90 minutes in class, 30 minutes on the air, followed by a concluding 90 minutes in class proved very successful and valuable to Scouts who had a busy schedule during the Jamboree.

The Foxhunting, finding hidden transmitters with directional antennas, proved to be of great interest to the Scouts and fit well with the high adventure, extreme sports focus of the Jamboree. The high altitude balloon launches went well, but our highlight was a contact with the International Space Station that saw 10 Scouts communicate directly with astronaut Luca Parmentano. We had excellent attendance and superb media coverage.

Summary

As you can see, there has been a great deal of progress in the visibility and participation in Radio Scouting over the past three years. I would argue that this has been due to visionary leadership, active communication, and engaged volunteers.

Scouting volunteers are truly passionate about the program. Radio Scouting is one more activity that can help them fulfill the mission of Scouting.



Visionary leadership,
active communication,
and engaged volunteers
grow Radio Scouting in
every aspect.

Author's Note

I hope this case study has been enlightening through providing a window into the Radio Scouting program, the change initiatives underway over the last three years, and my own leadership approach.

Best wishes on your PathForeWord.

Jim Wilson

Further Reading

You can find extensive information on Radio Scouting at the following locations:

Jamboree on the Air Reports
<http://www.k2bsa.net/jota-reports/>

K2BSA 2013 Jamboree Report
<http://www.k2bsa.net/2013-report/>

Morse Code Interpreter Strip
<http://www.k2bsa.net/morse-code/>

Amateur Radio Operator Rating Strip
<http://www.k2bsa.net/operator-rating/>

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PATHFOREWORDSM

Communicator | Organizer | Builder

Communicator: written + spoken word

Organizer: teams + projects

Builder: organizations + people



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